

# Iowa's Great Places

Governor Vilsack recently named Clinton, Sioux City, and Coon Rapids-Whiterock as Iowa's first three "Great Places." Great Places is an innovative pilot program designed to: 1) encourage communities across Iowa to come together to forge new visions of the future, and 2) foster inter-agency cooperation in targeting state resources on selected, high-potential communities.

The pilot Great Places represent the variety within Iowa -- from the urban core of Sioux City in the west, via the rural tourism experience of the Coon Rapids' heartland, to the river town of Clinton in the east. These three pilot programs each build upon the authentic natural, cultural, and historical values of our state.

Under the leadership of a cost-effective Department of Cultural Affairs program, numerous state agencies are coming together to provide technical assistance to help the pilot Great Places access the state, federal, and private resources needed to make their innovative visions a reality. However, more is needed to make this program a success.

As recipients of the first Great Places designations, we respectfully ask that:

**1) The Iowa Legislature appropriate \$3 million to the Rebuild Iowa Infrastructure Fund (RIIF) in FY2007, to be divided equally among the three Great Place communities and used as matches in vertical infrastructure grant requests.**

Each pilot Great Place has project packages ranging in value from \$25 to \$67 million, focused on using natural and cultural resources as engines of economic growth. To date, much of the state assistance to these Places has been in helping the communities identify potential grant opportunities. The state needs to go further and offer financial support.

A \$3 million state appropriation would represent just 3% of our combined budgets, yet would provide a significant boost for leveraging the additional federal, state, and private investments needed to make our extensive planning a reality. It would also signal legislative commitment to supporting this cost-effective program built entirely upon our state's strong sense of community and best cultural and historical values.

Legislative appropriations should be divided equally among the three pilot Great Places. An equal division would help counteract the tendency for state and private investment to be concentrated on larger urban areas at the expense of rural tourism opportunities. Even small and medium-size cities can attract and serve large numbers of visitors (with area-wide job and retail impacts) if they truly have local capacity and tourism potential and are assisted appropriately.

**2) Iowa Legislators should allow and encourage state agencies to give Great Places communities additional points on funding applications, as well as flexibility in date and match requirements.**

The three pilot Great Places were selected via a competitive process out of a field of 146 aspirants based on their strong tourism qualities, high levels of local resource commitment, and readiness to show quick results.

However, unless state agencies are allowed to give Great Places point preferences in grant applications, there will be no mechanism to ensure that state resources are indeed targeted on these three high-potential communities.

Great Places communities may also need more flexible date and match requirements. In Coon Rapids, the private Garst Family gift of over \$7 million in land and cash (already partially completed) should be allowed to count toward match requirements. All three Great Places are already investing significant local resources in pursuing our visions. We do not want to have to delay our ongoing investments in order to wait for the state to catch up.

**3) Iowa Legislators should encourage the Governor's office to refrain from naming additional Great Place communities until the first three are consolidated and underway, and these pilot processes can be evaluated.**

Great Places encouraged our communities to think big, and we did! Each winning community has prepared an extensive, integrated project package that will take at least five years to develop. Before naming additional Great Places, the state needs to ensure that its pilot projects are indeed moving forward with the technical and financial resources they need to be successful.

In addition, as a pilot program, Great Places needs to be evaluated. What is working, what is not, how could this be done better next time, and especially what is the projected and actual economic impact of these "quality of life" investments? Does the "one-stop shopping" model work? Where are the bottlenecks in the process? These questions need to be answered before more communities enter the Great Places pipeline.

**4) The Iowa Legislature should continue to support the Department of Cultural Affairs in the management of this effective and valuable program by funding the Governor's proposed \$500,000 line item for this purpose.**

The success of Great Places depends on numerous state agencies working together in new ways. Over the first year of Great Places -during the selection process and initial community contacts- the Department of Cultural Affairs has shown great initiative and creativity in making this happen. Specific staff members within a wide variety of agencies have stepped forward to offer planning and technical assistance to the first three Great Places. These communities urge the state to fully fund this cost-effective DCA coordination effort.

## Sioux City – An Expanded Urban Core Highlighting Our History

- **Fourth Street Place:** Public and private investment of over \$50 million has helped to re-establish 4<sup>th</sup> Street Place as the core of our downtown. We seek technical assistance for the Heritage Parking Ramp, a rolling application deadline for the establishment of a cultural district, a feasibility study for a regional Regents entrepreneur/one-stop center, and Vision Iowa funds for the Museum.
- **Front Door Riverfront Access:** With \$22.5 million in private funds and \$18 million in public funds invested in this area to date, Sioux City's riverfront has emerged as one of the city's crown jewels. We request state assistance in the areas of recreational trail connections, I-29 screening design, way-finding signage, and signature bridge design.
- **The Yards:** In its glory days, the Yards transformed Sioux City from a frontier hamlet to a world power. With recent public investment of \$25 million and private investment of \$37 million, we now seek assistance in securing demolition funds for the KD Station and for the transformation of the Yards Channel, and technical assistance for the Hose House restoration and for the Yards Interpretive Park.
- **The Floyd Boulevard Food Market:** Serving as both an agricultural and cultural center, the Floyd Boulevard Food Market wonderfully connects tradition with trendy. Over 25,000 volunteer hours, plus CAT funding, would help us leverage private investments of nearly \$200,000.
- **Sioux City School of Architecture:** A feasibility study for a Regents School of Design, in addition to legislation for incentive bundling for historic preservation, and technical assistance for terra cotta branding would enable Sioux City to preserve and promote its unique architectural style.

## Coon Rapids - Authentic Rural Tourism and Natural Beauty

Located at the intersection of four rural counties, Coon Rapids-Whiterock will breathe new life into depressed rural Iowa by promoting an ecotourism model based on authentic rural culture and values. Our project is built around the \$7 million gift of the Garst Family to establish Whiterock Conservancy as a nonprofit nature and research center open to low-impact public use. Our vision is that within five years, public access infrastructure, fabulous trail connections, and dozens of creative things to do will make diverse, accessible Coon Rapids the ecotourism hub of West-Central Iowa.

Immediate projects for which Coon Rapids is seeking support include:

- The basic road, trail, signage and parking infrastructure necessary to open the central 4,300-acre Whiterock Conservancy land area to the public.
- Watershed protection, environmental inventories, pasture reconfigurations, and protection of rare prairie remnants on the enormous Whiterock land base.
- Protection and promotion of the area's unusually dark skies (and thus bright stars) via public education on appropriate lighting and development of a Whiterock "starfield."
- A paved four-mile trail looping between Whiterock and the town of Coon Rapids, including city street-scaping and bike path development, to draw visitors onto Main Street and to allow residents, visitors, and elders easy access to the woods.

- A large public gathering facility for the city park.
- An assisted living complex, warm therapy pool, and dementia care unit for our award-winning Thomas Rest Haven.
- New fire and emergency facilities to enable our fire department to respond to increased outdoor recreation emergencies and prairie burns.

Medium term projects include:

- The establishment of the National Corn Museum (pending a feasibility study).
- Business development support for our creative local ecotourism entrepreneurs.
- Bike trail connections to put Coon Rapids (located on the cross-country America Discovery Route) at the hub of three major Iowa trail systems.
- A bilingual school-community liaison and a community wide diversity assessment.
- Identification and rehabilitation of historical buildings and the promotion of public art.

## **Clinton - Even More Things to Do with a River View**

Our project ties to the natural majesty of the Mississippi River, which borders the community on its approximate 12-mile border. In addition, the project connects with Clinton's heritage as a major sawmill industry center in the nation.

Project highlights are:

- Construction of a Sculpture Garden and Healthy Living Exercise Area along the riverfront.
- Development of a public beach adjacent to downtown Clinton.
- Additional trail development.
- Drawing motorists and visitors via North River Drive to the Lyons Historical District to the top of a flood levy, allowing greater access to views of the Mississippi River.
- Construction of two distinctive arches over both bridges entering the State of Iowa
- Construction of a major new museum: The Clinton Sawmill Heritage Experience.
- Construction of the tallest observation tower in Iowa. It will be designed to look like a lighthouse, and will rise 200 feet above a cliff that is 200 feet above the widest spot of the entire Mississippi River channel.
- Redevelopment and reconstruction of the "1,000 Steps". This WPA-era project connects Eagle Point Park visitors to the Mississippi River below.
- Development of Eagle Point Park Campground and playground.

*Thank you for consideration of our proposals.*

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